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Madison County Speaks Out on the “Partnership Strategy”

The “Partnership” and the “Partnership Strategy” have certainly been getting a lot of media coverage lately. Unfortunately, as is often the case, what is being presented in the headlines, news releases, and other slick image promoting packaging does not tell the full story about what this “strategy” does and how it will ultimately impact Beaverhead—Deerlodge Forest users. This professionally choreographed media blitz does not expose who the “Partnership” is and how they are manipulating the system and public opinion to get what they want while virtually ignoring or discounting other stakeholders in the Beaverhead—Deerlodge National Forest. The purpose of this article is to present facts and allow readers to draw their own conclusions about why Madison County is on record as being unable to support the “Partnership Strategy”.

Madison County believes its residents have a pretty big stake in the management of the Beaverhead—Deerlodge National Forest. So, when the process began four years ago to develop the revised forest plan, Madison County (along with Beaverhead County) joined in as cooperating agencies under NEPA regulations and worked with the Forest Service on the Forest Plan Revision Interdisciplinary Team. Many other concerned stakeholders; snowmobile clubs, non-motorized recreationists, livestock producers, motorized recreationists, mining groups, environmental groups, rural communities, sportsmen, wildlife agencies and others also participated. All these diverse interests, sometimes working together sometimes not, were generally trying to find solutions to issues about how the Beaverhead—Deerlodge National Forest will be managed for the next 15 years. In all fairness, the diversity and interests of the groups that actively participated are such that these groups did not and do not always see eye to eye. What resulted, though, was a proposed management strategy that may not satisfy completely any individual special interest, but was workable and acceptable to Madison County, except for the Snowcrest Recommended Wilderness, which was not even brought up for consideration until the proposed West Pioneer Wilderness was dropped. Former Forest Supervisor Tom Reilly stated, in a meeting with Madison and Beaverhead County Commissioners, that the reason the Snowcrest was recommended for wilderness was that they needed to make the wilderness people feel like they got something. That is ridiculous reasoning and flies in the face of logic and the procedure which should have been used to develop the forest plan. Further it is an insult to the work of Madison and Beaverhead Counties, which as cooperating agencies invested a great deal of time, effort, and money in the development of the plan.

The Forest Service’s Forest Plan Revision Team deserves to be recognized for doing a good job at a most difficult task. Through over 140 public meetings and an open door policy of gathering information they used a genuinely collaborative approach, weighed the concerns, analyzed the information and then developed the Draft Preferred Alternative. The point here is that anyone and everyone were invited to have input. No one was ignored; no one or no group was excluded in the name of expediency.

Madison County is encouraged by opposing groups working together, but the agreement of the “Partnership” does NOT preclude appeals and litigation by other extremist groups. Case in point is the Basin Creek project where thousands of acres of dead and dying trees were slated for removal to protect the watershed and promote a healthier landscape. Some of the “partners” agreed that it was a good project, but it is being litigated anyway.

The “Partnership” was formed and appeared months after the closing of the comment period on the Draft Forest Plan. The “Partnership” is made up of four lumber/wood products corporations and 3 environmental groups. To our knowledge, no other groups, interests, or stakeholders are included in this elite “Partnership”. Only one of the “Partnership” environmental groups has been actively involved in the process over the last 4 years. Other members of the “Partnership” only weighed in with comments at the last stage of the process. The “Partnership” has self-promoted their coming together as the timber industry and the environmental community reaching consensus agreement on the management of the Beaverhead—Deerlodge National Forest. Yet, this “Partnership” does not represent the consensus of the timber/wood products industry or a consensus of the environmental community. The “Partnership” and its “Strategy” only represents the rather narrow, selfish, interests of its seven members, period.

In our opinion, the “Partnership” and their “Strategy” only gives lip service to interests or concerns of others, but ultimately excludes many concerned parties and stakeholders except timber and wilderness. This is particularly true of both summer and winter motorized recreation groups.

Madison County has been present at a number of their presentations. Sadly, in their zeal to generate support, they often misrepresent what the USFS Preferred Alternative offers while they exaggerate the comparative benefits of their own proposal. In addition, the somewhat deceptive practice to leave out what might be considered negative aspects of their “strategy” has been employed. They are just not telling the whole story. Here are some examples.

The “partnership strategy” proposes using landscape scale stewardship contracting as the means to manage the forest and emphasize accomplishing restoration by this avenue. They are packaging this as a “new” idea while criticizing the USFS Preferred Alternative as management per usual which fails to address restoration. The stewardship contract concept certainly has merit. What they do not mention is that stewardship contracting is not a new idea, is not dependent on the partnership strategy and is in fact available right now as a means of accomplishing projects on the Forest. For example, the since 2002, the Beaverhead Development Corp. has administered the West Face Stewardship Project which is due for completion this year. As far as the USFS Preferred Alternative addressing restoration, there are stated goals in the plan for fuels reduction restoration, aspen restoration, reduction of conifer encroachment for grassland restoration, and identification of 15 key restoration watersheds. The USFS Preferred Alternative is all about management decisions addressing restoration.

During their power point presentation and subsequent discussions, the “Partnership” representatives accuse the Forest Service of managing the Beaverhead—Deerlodge National Forest single-mindedly with fire. These accusations can only be interpreted as a scare tactic, because the “partnership strategy’s” wildland fire use management is virtually the same as that in the USFS Preferred Alternative.

The Counties’ greatest criticism of this “partnership strategy” is that its formulation was not inclusive and is basically bad deal for the majority of county residents. Simply put we see the “Partnership” as two sides that got together, divided up the Beaverhead—Deerlodge National Forest according to their own interests and told us and the Forest Service to take it or leave it

Disclosure of the dramatic impacts on recreation and travel both summer and winter are not forthcoming from the “Partnership” either. If implemented this proposal would close from 1500 to 2000 miles of existing motorized roads and trails on the forest. Trial riders would not be the only ones impacted. Hunting access would be significantly reduced along with wood gathering access and other recreational pursuits.

More of what they are failing to tell people is that this proposal would close all but a couple high elevation snowmobile areas. Winter snowmobile use would be all but gone from the West Bighole, West Pioneers, East Pioneers, Italian Peaks, Electric Peak, Garfield Mountain, Sapphires, Stony Mountain, and Mt. Jefferson.

Confusing is the “Partnership’s” position on harvestable timber. The “partnership strategy” identifies a little over 700,000 acres for harvest. The USFS Preferred Alternative identifies a total of 1.1 million acres that is available for harvest. It is hard to fathom why the wood products corporations involved support a management plan that would decrease the identified acres for timber harvest by 400,000 acres. Yet, the “Partnership” contends that their proposal identifies more harvestable acres and would increase annual harvest of timber on the Beaverhead—Deerlodge National Forest. They apparently choose to ignore that the one significant variable that may increase

logs on trucks going down the road to the mill is a reduction in lawsuits and litigation. “Partnership” members suggest that they can carry the day and make obstructionist lawsuits filed by other entities go away. That is an unrealistic attitude if recent history is considered.

Something else they fail to disclose in their presentations of interest to livestock producers who graze forest allotments is why they want to burden them with the sage grouse and goshawk as a management indicator species. These species at best are terrible management indicator species and at worse may further hamper the ability to graze on the Beaverhead—Deerlodge National Forest.

There are a lot of consequences associated with the “partnership strategy” that lie in the details of the proposal. After comparing the “partnership strategy” to the USFS Preferred Alternative, the Madison County Commissioners believe that the residents of Madison County are better served by the USFS Preferred Alternative.

Madison County is very disappointed in how the “Partnership” has chosen to continue to conduct business. They have been told that they are misrepresenting the USFS Preferred Alternative in their presentations, but they continue to do so. We understand there is virtually no support for the “partnership strategy” from local forest users and local user groups. Consequently, the “Partnership” is ignoring those most affected by the plan, circumventing constructive criticism, and pleading their cause to politicians and bureaucrats in the Governor’s office and Washington DC. The “Partnership” is focusing their energy and expenditures on upmarket media coverage rather than adding substance to their plan. By all appearances this seems to be the chosen path for the “Partnership” to create political pressure on the Forest Service and ultimately bully their way into imposing their selfish proposal on all other users.

Now, we understand that these people are pressing to have the comment period on the Draft Plan extended or open another comment period altogether. This article started with a statement that this process started over 4 years ago. People, groups, and the agency have worked for 4 years to expose the issues, analyze the information, work on solutions, and draft the plan. Just because these latecomers want preferential treatment is no reason to incur the time and expense necessary to rehash the work already done. It is time to move forward.

In conclusion, Madison County wants to make clear two points. One, the “Partnership” is not telling you the whole story. Their propaganda is only meant to secure your support. There is no sweeping consensus to break “gridlock” on the Forest. Unless you are one of them, they are not much troubled with your concerns.

Two, after digging into their proposal, it appears that representatives for only two issues, timber and wilderness, got together and made a deal to divide up the Beaverhead—Deerlodge National Forest to suit themselves. They left everyone else out of the negotiations. Behind all the smoke and mirrors, media hype, image making, chest pounding, politicking, misinformation, and warm fuzzy rhetoric about the environmental community and the timber industry holding hands and protecting your interest is a proposed management plan for the Beaverhead—Deerlodge National Forest that is a bad deal for the rest of Montana citizens.

Madison County cannot and will not support the “partnership strategy”.

Sincerely,

Signed

C. Ted Coffman, Chairman
Board of Commissioners
Madison County

Signed

Frank G. Nelson

Signed

David Schulz